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The Nature and Means of Liberation in Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Advaita Vedānta

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Introduction

I live. I perform actions, have experiences and accumulate karmic impressions. I die. I am reborn. The cycle continues until I escape - or am 'liberated' from - it.

These statements, while simplistic, are a broad reflection of the teachings of most schools of Indian philosophy, orthodox or heterodox. The doctrine of *karma* and rebirth is 'of near universal pervasiveness' in Indian religious thought (Tull 2004: 318), and the goal of 'liberation' which underlies almost all Indian philosophical and religious thought is the goal of freedom from the cycle of *saṃsāra*: freedom from rebirth into the bondage and suffering of earthly life¹.

However, while Indian philosophers agreed on the ultimate goal, they did not necessarily agree on the underlying nature of that liberation or the means of attaining it. In this essay, I propose to discuss how liberation was characterised in three of India's classical, orthodox, *darśanas* - Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Advaita Vedānta. My aim will be to highlight the apparent differences between the three schools, but also to consider their similarities. While Sāṃkhya and Yoga are often presented as 'sister *darśanas*', I propose to show that their approaches to the means of liberation are substantially different, even though they may perceive its nature in similar terms; while Sāṃkhya and Advaita are often presented as radically opposed to each other, I propose to show that their approaches to the means of liberation are in fact similar, even though they may perceive its nature in different terms. As well as a general - if superficial - analysis of the teachings of each *darśana*, I will also discuss the approach each takes to the possibility of liberation during an individual's lifetime. To conclude, I will touch on the question of whether, in fact, the differences between the three schools go to the root of the nature and means of liberation.

Defining terms

Each of Sāṃkhya, Yoga and Advaita Vedānta, in its broadest sense, covers a range of teachings. As Eliade has pointed out, the word *yoga* has become a by-word for almost 'any ascetic technique and any method of meditation' (1969:4). Advaita, although primarily a school of Upaniṣadic exegesis, saw differences in

¹ It is worth contrasting this idea of liberation, which began to arise in the *Upaniṣads*, with the earlier Vedic goals of prolonging both earthly life and, after death, life in a heavenly realm. In early Vedic times, life after death was something to be achieved, rather than something to escape from (Killingley 1997:2).

interpretation even before Bādarāyaṇa's *Vedānta Sūtra*². Sāṃkhya is referred to in the *Upaniṣads* and *Mahābhārata* and, while the paucity of surviving literature makes tracing its development difficult, the doctrines outlined in the key surviving text, the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, may well differ from those originally expounded in earlier texts, including the now lost root text of Sāṃkhya, the *Sūtra* attributed to Kapila³. In this essay, I propose to focus on what have generally come to be considered the 'classical' teachings of the three schools in what we may call their 'consolidation' phase: the Sāṃkhya of the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, the Yoga of the *Yoga Sūtra* attributed to Patañjali, and Advaita Vedānta as expounded by Śaṅkara, with particular reference to his *Upadeśasāhasrī*⁴.

A common starting and ending point

I have already noted that, by the time of the flowering of these schools, the prevailing view of life on earth in Indian philosophy was that it was characterised by suffering. Unlike in early Vedic times, prolonging earthly life was no longer seen as desirable. For each of the three schools, therefore, the starting point for the analysis of liberation was the need to overcome the suffering of earthly existence, and the ending point was the achievement of this by permanent release from the

² Which is thought to have reached its final form in around 400-500 CE (King 1999:54). Hiriyanna 1993:337 notes that Bādarāyaṇa alludes to seven Vedāntic teachers and to 'differences of view' in respect of the nature of *mokṣa*.

³ Sāṃkhya in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, for example, displays theistic tendencies largely absent from the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*.

⁴ In this essay, all references to the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* are from Niranjanananda Saraswati 2008; to the *Yoga Sūtra* from Āraṇya 1963; and to the *Upadeśasāhasrī* from Mayeda 1992. I will refer to the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* as 'SK', the *Yoga Sūtra* as 'YS' and the *Upadeśasāhasrī* as 'US'. Although ideas in Indian thought rarely correspond in age to the age of the texts expounding them, and accurate dating is impossible, it is worth noting in passing the approximate chronology of these three texts. The SK is generally thought to date from around 350 to 450 CE (see, e.g., King 1999:170); the YS from about the same time (see, e.g., Whicher 1998:39), though some still put them in the final centuries BCE, even though it is now generally accepted that the Patañjali of the YS and the grammarian Patañjali were not one and the same. Although the SK and YS are usually thought to be of approximately the same age, however, it is generally considered that the Sāṃkhya presented by Īśvarakṛṣṇa is older than the Yoga presented by Patañjali (Hiriyanna 1993:268). Śaṅkara, on the other hand, is generally thought to have lived in the seventh and/or eighth centuries CE and the US, accordingly, to date from that period, in other words somewhat later than either of the other two texts.

saṃsāric cycle. Of the three texts which form the focus of this essay, the SK is perhaps the most upfront: SK1 identifying three kinds of suffering, internal (*ādhyātmika*), external (*adhibhautika*) and divine or celestial (*ādhidaivika*), and highlighting the natural human desire to know the means of terminating them. As the SK points out, some suffering can be attenuated by means such as medicine or ritual, but relief through those sources is neither permanent nor complete. YS2.15 notes that ‘all worldly objects... cause suffering’ but (2:16) that suffering yet to come can be avoided. USII.2.45 tells of the student seeking relief from the pain of the waking and dreaming states, which is only temporarily relieved in deep sleep. It is essential to remember that none of the three schools, therefore, approaches the idea of liberation from a purely theoretical standpoint. None of them seeks ‘the truth as an abstract end in itself’ (Edgerton 1924:1). Each of them has a practical goal: to bring an end to the influence of *karma* and, as a result, freedom from *saṃsāra*. I turn now to look at how each of them perceives that goal and the means of achieving it.

Sāṃkhya

SK2, having noted the ultimate inefficacy of medicine and ritual, sets out the ‘superior method’ for the relief of suffering. That method is the development of discriminative knowledge (*viññāna*) of the manifest (*vyakta*), the unmanifest (*avyakta*) and the knower (*jñā*). Development of that knowledge requires an understanding of Sāṃkhya ontology, in which the manifest world - or matter - evolves from an unmanifest root cause, *mūlaprakṛti*, described as not evolved from anything else and ‘ungenerated’ (*avikṛti*). *Mūlaprakṛti* itself is not cognised because of its subtlety, but rather is cognised through its evolution via the 24 *tattvas* (beginning with the subtler levels of mind (*mahat* or *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra*) and ending with the gross elements of earth, water, fire, air and ether), which operates through the principle of *satkāryavāda*, the pre-existence of an effect in its cause. In both manifest and unmanifest forms, *prakṛti* is permeated by the three *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, having the qualities respectively of lightness, mobility and heaviness, which operate through a process of continual combination and modification, bound by eight innate predispositions (*bhāva*)⁵.

Separate from both manifest and unmanifest *prakṛti* sits *puruṣa*, ‘spirit’ or ‘pure consciousness’. *Puruṣa* is multiple (considered proved by the multiplicity of individuals in the world); not pervaded by the *guṇas*; and an inactive pure witness,

⁵ Virtuous nature (*dharma*), knowledge (*jñāna*), non-attachment (*vairāgya*), power (*aśvarya*) and their respective opposites.

described as solitary, separate from experience and without agency (SK19). Its existence is proved by, amongst other things, the need for a ‘controller’ (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of *prakṛti* and by what is described as the ‘universal striving after freedom’ (SK17).

Questions immediately arise about the nature of the relationship between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, described as one of *saṃyoga* (often translated as ‘conjunction’), if *puruṣa* has no quality of agency. That conjunction is said to be necessary, both to allow creation and, conversely, to allow liberation. SK58 teaches that ‘even as people engage in activity to relieve desires, so also the unmanifest *prakṛti* functions for the sake of emancipation of *puruṣa*’, and, in the famous metaphor of SK59, ‘just as a dancing girl ceases to dance after having been seen by the audience, so *prakṛti* ceases to operate after having shown herself to *puruṣa*’. For present purposes, however, the key point is not an analysis of the nature of the conjunction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, but rather an understanding that the two remain always fundamentally separate, for it is only through knowledge of that fundamental separation that liberation can arise⁶. Without that knowledge (in the state of nescience, or *avidyā*) one remains bound in the cycle of *saṃsāra*.

The means of liberation according to Sāṃkhya, therefore, is knowledge. SK44 puts it simply: ‘Through knowledge comes release and by its reverse [i.e. *avidyā*] one becomes bound’. Knowledge plays an important part in Vedic tradition. In the *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas*, for example, it was accepted that knowledge of something led to control over it⁷, so it is not surprising to see an orthodox school such as Sāṃkhya identifying knowledge as the key to liberation. But what is the form of that knowledge and the means of acquiring it?

Hiriyanna puts it thus: ‘the knowledge should be more than a mere belief that nature is different from spirit. It should be an immediate experience...’ (1993:293). However, the SK does not provide a detailed roadmap towards acquiring that experience. According to SK64, liberating discriminative knowledge simply arises from meditative analysis of the principles of Sāṃkhya (*tattwābhyāsa*). Its genesis lies in cultivation within the *buddhi*, or intellect, of sattvic qualities (i.e.

⁶ Note that it is not strictly *puruṣa* which is liberated, for *puruṣa* is never bound. It is *prakṛti* which is bound by nescience or ignorance (*avidyā*) and it is *prakṛti*, in the form of the subtle body, which transmigrates and accordingly needs to be freed from the *saṃsāric* cycle (SK62). In many ways the term ‘liberation’ has misleading connotations in both Sāṃkhya and Advaita Vedānta, in that it suggests a process rather than a realisation of that which has always been so.

⁷ A theme continued, and developed, in the *Upaniṣads*.

the four ‘positive’ *bhāvas*). Although the *buddhi* is firmly within the realm of *prakṛti*, it is *buddhi* which presents experiences to *puruṣa*, operating as a kind of ‘conduit’ between them (Chapple 1990:57), and ultimately, through the single predisposition for knowledge, which has the power to free *prakṛti* (SK37 and 63).

Discriminative knowledge, when it arises, takes the form of ‘I am not’, ‘Nothing is mine’ and ‘Not I’, and is described in SK64 as complete (*aparīkṣa*), pure (*viśuddha*), free from error (*aviparyaya*) and absolute (*kevala*). At the moment of its arising, *puruṣa* ‘sees’ *prakṛti*, which ceases her dance of evolution, the *bhāvas* having ‘become devoid of their causal efficacy’ (SK67). Though the *saṃyoga* between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* persists, ‘there is no motive for further evolution’ of *prakṛti* (SK66) and liberation, described as *kaivalya* (literally ‘aloneness’), is achieved.

Yoga

Patañjali’s Yoga is often presented as a form of ‘practical Sāṃkhya’, adopting Sāṃkhya philosophy but elaborating on the practical means of attaining *kaivalya*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (5.4 and 5.5) describes as ‘foolish’ those who consider Sāṃkhya and Yoga as ‘separate ideas’: those who practise one ‘reach the place attained’ by those who practise the other (Patton 2008:62). However, as Edgerton points out (1924:5-6), nowhere in the *Gītā* is there any suggestion that ‘Sāṃkhya’ and ‘Yoga’ represent any refined forms of philosophical speculation. For Edgerton, Sāṃkhya in the *Gītā* simply means ‘the way of salvation by pure knowledge’ and Yoga in the *Gītā* the way of salvation through ‘disciplined, unselfish activity’ (1924:4)⁸. It follows, as Larson stresses (1989:132), that it is perhaps wrong to argue that the two schools were related in early Indian thought, for the simple reason that they were not ‘schools’ at that stage.

I would argue that, in any event, by the time of the SK and the YS, the relationship between the two was more complex than simply the ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ of a common *darśana*. While Yoga is undoubtedly influenced by Sāṃkhya philosophy, the yogic path to liberation bears little resemblance to anything described in the SK, and, as noted by several commentators, bears considerably more relation to Buddhist ideas. Larson’s suggestion that ‘The Yoga system blends the Sāṃkhya

⁸ Larson notes the number of contexts in early texts, including the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the medical treatises, where Sāṃkhya and Yoga appear to mean little more than ‘speculative intuition of a cognitive sort’ and ‘speculative intuition of a conative sort’ respectively (1989:131).

philosophy with the traditions of meditation preserved in the Buddhist traditions’ (Jacobsen 2005:14) could be considered to be broadly correct ⁹.

The state of final liberation in Yoga, as in Sāṃkhya, is *kaivalya*. While, in Sāṃkhya, *kaivalya* is described as the cessation of the dance of *prakṛti*, having been ‘seen’ by *puruṣa*, in Yoga the description focuses on the *guṇas* which, having fulfilled their purpose, ‘involute’ (*pratiprasava*) allowing *puruṣa* to be established in its natural form of pure consciousness ‘all alone for all time’ (YS4.34 and Vyāsa’s commentary: Āraṇya 1963:406). Fundamentally, the characterisation of *kaivalya* in both Sāṃkhya and Yoga is the realisation of *puruṣa* as pure consciousness ‘free from any entanglement with *prakṛti*’ (Satyananda Saraswati 66).

However, the means of liberation in Yoga are presented in a more sophisticated way. The YS in no way deny the efficacy of knowledge as part of the path to liberation: 1.16 describes as ‘supreme detachment’ (*paravairāgya*) a state of indifference to the *guṇas* achieved through knowledge of the nature of *puruṣa*, and 4.31 describes a state of knowledge free from ‘the coating of all afflictions and actions’ (Āraṇya 1963:400), which is experienced immediately before *kaivalya*. However, the final goal of Yoga is described not in terms of knowledge, but rather as the cessation (*nirodha*) of the turnings of the mind (*cittavṛtti*), in other words a transcendence of knowledge¹⁰. In order to reach that point, the *yogin* must pursue both detachment (*vairāgya*) and *abhyāsa*, or practice (YS1.12), continued ‘for a long time’ (1.14). Rather than simply relying on the *tattwābhyāsa* called for by the SK, the YS require that and more: the *yogin* must choose from, as Whicher puts it (1999:782n16), ‘a diversity of practices which more or less complement each other’.

The practices offered by the YS break down into three broad categories. *Pāda* (book) 1, generally considered as presenting the ‘direct’ approach, offers several

⁹ It is something of a moot point whether Yoga influenced Buddhism, vice versa, or both. Larson 1989 tends to the view that Buddhism influenced Yoga; cf. Jacobsen 2005:13. Eliade 1958:101-2 sees Yoga as one of ‘the greatest of Indian spiritual syntheses’. The relationship between the YS and Buddhism is complex, and the likelihood is that, as with most schools of Indian philosophy in their consolidation phase, there was much dialogue, debate and cross-fertilisation. La Vallée Poussin 1936/7 contains one of the more detailed analyses of the common ideas between the two.

¹⁰ YS1.2. When the turnings of the mind cease, the ‘Seer’ is said to ‘abide in its true nature’ (YS1.3). The word ‘Seer’ is a literal translation of ‘*draṣṭṛ*’, a non-participating observer of the world, broadly equated with *puruṣa*. It is interesting that the YS only rarely use the term *puruṣa*.

distinct paths, all of which, with the exception of that in 1.34 (retention of exhalation), revolve around some form of meditation¹¹. *Pāda* 2 sets out two further paths. The first, in 2.1, is described as the ‘*yoga* of action’ (*kriyāyoga*) and consists of three practices:

- *tapas* - in this context, usually defined as self-discipline;
- *svādhyāya* - study of one’s self or of scriptures; and
- *īśvarapranidhāna* - devotion or surrender to *īśvara*.

The second is the well known ‘eight limbed’, or *aṣṭāṅga*, path (2.29):

- *yama* - behavioural norms
- *niyama* - personal observances (including *tapas*, *svādhyāya* and *īśvarapranidhāna* - see above)¹²
- *āsana* - bodily posture (literally ‘seat’, though later appropriated to refer to the physical postures of *hatha yoga*)
- *prāṇāyāma* - restraint of breath, or of *prāṇa*¹³
- *pratyāhāra* - withdrawal of the senses
- *dhāraṇā* - concentration
- *dhyāna* - meditation
- *samādhi* - absorption¹⁴.

Whichever path of practice one chooses, the key to liberation lies in the attainment of *samādhi*, often translated as ‘absorption’¹⁵. Not only is *samādhi* the final stage of the *aṣṭāṅga*, path, the *kriyāyoga* path of YS2.1 is said, in 2.2, to ‘bring about’

¹¹ Including meditation on the syllable OM, on the images in dreams, on a mind free from desires and, in the particularly attractive 1.39, ‘on whatsoever thing one may like’.

¹² The introduction of detailed ethical practices into the Yoga path may reflect Buddhist influence, or may be a development of the Sāṃkhya idea that ‘through the predisposition towards virtuous nature (*dharma*) one ascends to higher planes of existence’ (SK44) leading to an increasingly sattvic state of mind. It is noteworthy that *yama* and *niyama* do not feature in the six-fold yogic path of the *Maitrī Upaniṣad*, which may predate the YS.

¹³ *Prāṇa* is a complex, but very important, term in *yoga*. Although often roughly equated with breath, it is generally seen as encompassing a more profound energy or ‘life force’.

¹⁴ Points to note here are, first, the incorporation of the three limbs of the ‘second’ (YS2.1) path as just three of the five *niyamas*; and, secondly, the idea of *eight* limbs, which many commentators (e.g. Stoler Miller 1998:52) have considered a reflection of the Buddha’s noble eight fold path.

¹⁵ Confusingly, in his commentary on YS1.1, Vyāsa equates Yoga with *samādhi* (Āraṇya 1963:1), even though, in many places in the YS, *samādhi* is seen as a stage on the path to *kaivalya*. See also Rukmani 1997:615.

samādhi. *Samādhi* is presented as having a number of levels, which arise as the mind is progressively quietened. The first four (which together form *samprajñata samādhi* and have often been compared to Buddhism's four *dhyānas*) represent a progression in which, initially, thoughts (*vitarka*) and reflections (*vicāra*) are used to enhance the concentration process (YS1.17). While those identifications with *prakṛti* eventually become more subtle, all four stages of *samprajñata samādhi* are seen as bearing karmic 'seeds' and, accordingly, are not sufficient in themselves to lead to *kaivalya*. However, by the final stage of *samprajñata samādhi*, the 'seeds' become such as to disincline the mind from its natural tendency to produce 'turnings' (*cittavṛtti*), or distracting associations with the realm of *prakṛti*. As Chapple puts it (1990:65) 'The yogin arrests the tendency to generate and be captivated by the manifest world...'. Ultimately, the *yogin* moves from generating these 'good seeds' to generating no 'seeds' at all. At this point, nescience (*avidyā*) and the other 'afflictions' (*kleśa*¹⁶) are overcome, and the *yogin* achieves the final state of seedless or objectless (*asamprajñata*) *samādhi*, in which the turnings of the mind are stilled, the *guṇas* have fulfilled their purpose, *puruṣa* abides in its true, independent nature 'not subject in any way to the seductive wiles of *prakṛti*', (Chapple 1990:66-67), and *kaivalya* ensues.

So, while the description of liberation in Yoga employs Sāṃkhya terminology and looks very like Sāṃkhya's own description of *kaivalya*, the role of knowledge in effecting that liberation is somewhat different. While the YS contain, in places, conflicting statements about the role of discriminative knowledge in attaining *kaivalya*¹⁷, their final verses suggest that, ultimately, that attainment requires more than just knowledge of the *puruṣa/prakṛti* distinction. For not only is Yoga couched in terms of stilling the mind's turnings, but afflictions (*kleśa*) and actions (*karma*) only cease in the state of *dharmamegha samādhi*, which is explicitly described as a state of disinterest even in omniscience (YS4.29). Unlike in Sāṃkhya (and, as we shall see, in Advaita Vedānta), where acquisition of knowledge is key, the *yogin* has to let go of the desire for knowledge. Only then do the obstacles to liberation disappear and the *yogin* moves to a place of higher awareness or transformed consciousness (*citiśākti*) (YS4.29-34). In other words,

¹⁶ YS2.3 - nescience (*avidyā*), egoism (*asmitā*), attachment (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), fear of death (*abhiniveśa*).

¹⁷ YS 2.25 provides, for example, that *kaivalya* arises simply as a result of the absence of *avidyā*. Rukmani 1997:623 emphasises some of the internal contradictions within the YS and makes the point that it is best to accept Yoga 'as a discipline to be followed rather than to be understood intellectually.'

the *yogin* ends up transcending even discriminative knowledge itself: only then does *kaivalya* arise¹⁸.

Advaita Vedānta

We have seen that Sāṃkhya and Yoga share a common idea of the nature of liberation: release from the cycle of *saṃsāra* comes from the realisation of the fundamental separation of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. However, while for Sāṃkhya this realisation comes about through the cultivation of knowledge alone, for Yoga more is required: a path of practice through which, whichever path one takes, one ultimately must achieve a state - *asamprajñata samādhi* - in which consciousness is transformed and knowledge transcended. When we turn to Advaita, we find a very different perception of the nature of the universe, yet, at least in the orthodox teachings of Śaṅkara, a return to the idea of knowledge as the key to liberation.

Unlike the dualist Sāṃkhya, with its multiple *puruṣas* and eternal separation of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta harnesses passages from the *Upaniṣads* to support a worldview of non-duality, in other words of one single ultimate reality, *brahman*. *Brahman* appears both as the individual Self - the *ātman* - and as the manifest world, an illusory manifestation of *brahman* which operates to limit the individual's understanding of the true nature of his or her Self, namely its identity with *brahman*. We see already, therefore, the importance in Advaita, as in Sāṃkhya and Yoga, of *avidyā*, the nescience which prevents the realisation which leads to liberation.

¹⁸ As a footnote to this brief and necessarily superficial summary of the yogic path, it is worth noting the appearance in the YS of *īśvara* (or God), which puts Yoga into direct contrast to the atheistic Sāṃkhya of Īśvarakṛṣṇa, in which *īśvara*, if accepted at all, is seen, as are all deities, as being in the realm of *prakṛti* and accordingly largely irrelevant for the purposes of liberation (SK53 and 54). Cf., as already noted, the theistic nature of Sāṃkhya in the way in which the term was used in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. *īśvara* in the YS is a curiosity, a kind of 'super-*puruṣa*' 'unaffected by affliction, deed, result of action or the latent impressions thereof' (YS1.24). While devotion to *īśvara* is presented (YS1.23) as a direct route to *samādhi*, it is nowhere in the YS suggested that such devotion is a *necessary* route to *samādhi*, nor that any form of divine grace forms part of the path to liberation. Although *īśvarapranidhāna* appears in both the *kriyāyoga* path of YS2.1 and the *aṣṭāṅga yoga* path of YS2.29, there are other direct routes to *samādhi* offered in *Pāda* 1 which do not involve *īśvara*. The inclusion of *īśvara* in the YS is most likely a nod towards theistic tendencies within non-Sāṃkhya and non-Buddhist schools of Indian thought: for Eliade, *īśvara* in the YS is 'perfectly useless' (1958:74). Clements 2008:91-93 discusses the role of *īśvara* in the YS in more detail.

As in Sāṃkhya, liberation - *mokṣa* - for Śaṅkara is brought about quite simply through knowledge¹⁹. The same student referred to on page 4 above was taught by his teacher that ‘The cause is nescience; it is removed by knowledge. When nescience has been removed, you will be released from transmigratory existence... since its cause will be gone’ (USII.2.48). As Mayeda says (1992:11) this teaching ‘is not only the starting point of his philosophy, but also its goal’. However, while the *avidyā*, as in Sāṃkhya, relates to a mis-perception of the nature of the manifest world, the requisite knowledge here is not knowledge of the separation of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, both of which in Sāṃkhya are perceived to be real, but rather the knowledge of the absolute identity of *ātman* and *brahman* and the illusory nature of the apparent plurality of the manifest world. Once that knowledge is attained, desire becomes impossible; as desire is the key to transmigration, according to Yājñavalkya in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.6, once it is removed, there can be no more transmigration²⁰.

Given Advaita’s reliance on Upaniṣadic teachings as its foundation, the question arises whether the *Upaniṣads* themselves can provide the knowledge that leads to liberation - in the way that meditation on the Sāṃkhya principles can lead to the requisite liberating knowledge - or whether more is required, in the way that Yoga requires a path of practice. Consistently with the essential idea that *mokṣa* is a state to be realised, rather than produced, Śaṅkara teaches that knowledge of the *Upaniṣads* can lead directly to liberation, if the student is sufficiently prepared. However, this direct knowledge is the exception, rather than the rule²¹. More commonly, the seeker after liberation is required to go through the three-fold process of:

- *śravaṇa* - repeated hearing of the texts
- *manana* - discernment of their meaning
- *nididhyāsana* - contemplation on the truth revealed

under the guidance of a competent teacher. The seeker himself is required to be dispassionate toward things non-eternal; to have abandoned the desire for sons,

¹⁹ USII.1.1: ‘The means to final release is knowledge.’

²⁰ Note that YS1.15 also places importance on removing desire as the key to *vairāgya*.

²¹ Comans 2000:302, citing the *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* 4.1.2. The example commonly cited is that of Vāmadeva, who, according to *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 2.5, obtained liberating knowledge while still in the womb.

wealth and the world; to have reached the state of a *paramahansa* wandering ascetic and to have satisfied certain other pre-requisites²².

Advaita could be said, therefore, to represent something of a ‘middle way’ between the other two schools. As in Sāṃkhya, the key to liberation is knowledge. But, while ‘direct’ liberation is possible, Advaita, like Yoga, also prescribes a path. Unlike Yoga, however, the path is designed to lead to knowledge, rather than to the stilling of the mind. Śaṅkara expressly denied the efficacy of Yoga as a means to liberation, on the basis partly that liberation through action was inimical to the idea that liberation arises from the realisation of something which already exists, but also on the basis that the importance which Yoga attaches to stilling the mind runs counter to the Advaita method of deep thought and reflection, which pre-supposes mental activity (Comans 1993:26)²³.

A common feature of both Yoga and Advaita is the importance of practical action as a means of removing obstacles to liberation. We have seen the importance in Yoga of the removal of the *kleśas* (including *avidyā*), as obstacles to *kaivalya*²⁴. In Advaita, the removal of obstacles (*pratibandha*) is also essential, hence the strict ascetic ‘qualification’ requirements for the seeker after liberation referred to above. Advaita’s threefold path, in the same way as any other action, including ritual or yogic action, does not itself have the function of leading to any form of attainment, but rather the more negative function of removing the obstacles to the knowledge of the Self ‘that is then discovered to have never really been bound’ (Comans 2000:313). Just like *puruṣa* in Sāṃkhya, *ātman* in Advaita has never been bound, so it can never be ‘liberated’²⁵.

In propounding his teachings, Śaṅkara attempted - as Yoga did - to offer a practical approach to achieving liberation. Whereas Sāṃkhya ontology recognised the manifest world as a real evolution of *prakṛti*, which needed to ‘involute’ before liberation could occur, for Śaṅkara, the manifest world could be perceived and analysed at a level of conventional truth (*vyavahārika*) only, for *brahman* could

²² USII.1.2 (Mayeda 1992:211).

²³ Sundareshan 2003 argues strongly that Śaṅkara was not ‘anti-yoga’ *per se*, and in fact adopted terminology from Yoga in several places, including *cittavṛtti nirodha* as the state of mind of the *jīvanmukta* (see below). As he acknowledges, however, for Śaṅkara, yogic action only worked to help lead to the state of knowledge which would allow for *mokṣa*.

²⁴ YS 4.30

²⁵ However, unlike *puruṣa*, which, at least in its Yoga presentation, somehow has the function of a dispassionate observer, *ātman* cannot even have this function as, by definition, to do so would imply a duality.

not, by definition, be an object of thought or language. At the absolute level, it had no need to evolve and involute: rather, the key was to realise the level of absolute truth (*paramārthika*) reflected in the *ātman/brahman* identity. For most seekers, that realisation required not just bare knowledge or practice, but the guidance of a qualified teacher²⁶.

Liberation in life

The idea that liberation arises exclusively or partly through knowledge inevitably raises the question of whether liberation is possible during an individual's lifetime - for, unless the acquisition of the requisite knowledge led to instantaneous death, it would seem inevitably to follow that there must exist a 'knower', even though 'the idea that one can reach the supreme goal while still living is quite audacious' (Fort 1998:1). In Sāṃkhya, while the attainment of perfect, discriminating knowledge results in the *bhāvas* losing their causal efficacy, SK67 makes clear that the physical body remains, due to the force of latent dispositions (*saṃskāra*) 'just like a potter's wheel continues to rotate due to the momentum transferred to it by the potter'. When the body is finally dropped at death, liberation becomes 'complete and absolute' and 'final and permanent' (SK68).

The YS, on the other hand, nowhere refer explicitly to the idea of living liberation. In his seminal commentary, Vyāsa describes *dharmamegha* as leading the enlightened person to be 'liberated even in his lifetime' (Āraṇya 1963:398)²⁷. However, as Rukmani points out (1999:743), *kaivalya* in Yoga can only come about through *asamprañāta samādhi*, so how can *dharmamegha*, which is still within the realm of *samādhi* 'with seeds', amount to liberation? As she contends, 'Yoga in the Yoga Sūtras subscribes to the notion of [living liberation] without being able to substantiate it' (*ibid*)²⁸.

Neither Sāṃkhya nor Yoga makes any attempt to describe the nature of the liberated state in life and, clearly, the concept raises several questions, not least as to how the liberated person acts free of *avidyā* and the other obstacles to liberation and free of the acquisition of *karma*, and as to whether living liberation is in some

²⁶ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.14.2 is cited as authority for this.

²⁷ Interestingly, *dharmamegha* is a term used in Mahayana Buddhism for the highest level of attainment of the *bodhisattva* (Chapple 1996:125). It has no equivalent in Sāṃkhya.

²⁸ Larson (1989:133) raises the question whether Vyāsa was largely responsible for the YS being seen as 'more Sāṃkhya' than a close analysis would allow. At 1999:727, he identifies six key differences between Sāṃkhya and Yoga.

way a ‘lesser’ liberation than liberation at death. The idea of living liberation - *jīvanmukti* - became much more developed in Advaita Vedānta, though Śaṅkara himself rarely used the term (while nevertheless espousing the concept)²⁹. Given the nature of the Advaita path, the existence of living liberated beings was essential to ensure a supply of suitably qualified teachers. But, on a philosophical level, if our association with the phenomenal world is the result of *avidyā*, how can the physical body remain without some trace of *avidyā* remaining? How can knowledge destroy some, but not all, *karma*? The not entirely convincing answer adopted by Advaita is that a trace of ignorance *does* remain, due to the power of *saṃskāras* still working their effects. While the *jīvanmukta* will create no new karmic impressions, those already accumulated, but yet to be fulfilled (*prārabdha karma*), will continue to work their effects until the *jīvanmukta* casts off his human body³⁰. However, is this remaining trace of *avidyā* a limitation on liberation? Is *jīvanmukti* a ‘lower’ liberation than liberation at death - *videhamukti*? As Nelson points out, such an idea ‘would weaken Advaita’s professed non-dualism.... [for] How can there be further liberation for one already liberated?’ (1996:24).

The question of living liberation became a major debating point among later Vedāntins. Its development in Advaita may have reflected the influence of the Buddhist concept of *nirvāṇa*, to which it has many similarities. In reality, in all three schools we are considering, it is likely that there was a pragmatic driving force behind the possibility of living liberation. For, even if the ultimate goal was perceived as freedom from re-birth, there is a certain unattractiveness about the idea of death as a pre-requisite for liberation. In Sāṃkhya (and Yoga), the isolation of *puruṣa* into inactive solitude brings with it no concept of happiness or bliss, for those emotions must necessarily operate in the realm of *prakṛti*. As Iyer neatly puts it (2008:115): ‘Even if one agreed with Sartre that ‘Hell is other people’, one would hardly find such a goal... particularly appealing.’. If liberation were not possible within life, a similar argument could be run for Advaita’s *mokṣa*, which was only seen to encompass a state of bliss by teachers later than Śaṅkara.

Conclusions

All three schools considered in this essay start their quest for liberation from the point that mundane life is characterised by suffering. All three have as their

²⁹ The term ‘*jīvanmukti*’ is not used in Sāṃkhya or Yoga.

³⁰ Fort 1998:39 suggests that final liberation might even in some circumstances be delayed beyond the next death.

ultimate goal release from that suffering by bringing to an end the saṃsāric cycle. All three, to some extent, suggest that a living person may achieve a state of 'liberation'. All three see the removal of nescience as an essential part of the process. Although Sāṃkhya and Yoga are often presented as radically opposed to Advaita, we have seen that Sāṃkhya and Advaita share an emphasis on the primacy of knowledge as the means of liberation, and that Yoga and Advaita share a focus on practicality ahead of pure theory. So how different are these schools' analyses of the nature and means of liberation?

Answering that question is complicated by the fact that, over the centuries after the texts and teachers reviewed in this essay, the dialogue between schools did not end. In fact, as Rukmani notes (2008:63), from the time of Śaṅkara onwards, other Indian philosophical schools tended to adopt Advaita terminology so that, in later commentarial tradition, concepts such as *samādhi* and *mokṣa* are often treated as equivalent. Similarly, the practices of Yoga were adopted for Advaita ends, as is seen in the *Aparokṣānubhūti*, a text attributed to Śaṅkara himself, though more generally believed to be later³¹, and the definitely later *Yoga Vasīṣṭha*³², perhaps for the simple reason that, as Iyer pithily puts it, 'the overall practical method works' (2008:110)³³.

However, there remains a difference between adopting Yoga practices for Advaita ends, and, as some have done, attempting to read the YS as a non-dualist text, or to treat Sāṃkhya and Advaita as putting forward a similar worldview, but from a different perspective. Pflueger (2003:72) asks whether we can 'honestly revision Patañjali' in, for example, the way suggested by Whicher, as a 'kinder, gentler *darśana*' in which *kaivalya* does not represent the 'evaporation of our personhood' (Whicher 1998:305), before concluding that, despite efforts to re-interpret it, Yoga 'preserves a sublime and uncompromising spiritual vision' and that any interpretation which seeks to compromise the isolation of *kaivalya* 'trades the unique vision' of Yoga 'for a mass appeal which was likely never part of its conception' (2003:79). As Pflueger points out, both Sāṃkhya and Yoga pay far more attention to the mundane world of the evolution of *prakṛti* and the powers of the practising *yogin* than they do to analysing the nature of liberation: 'the real work is the work of treading the path of liberation' (*ibid.*). Yet, ultimately, 'However thrilling the chariot of *samprajñata samādhi*, in the end the yogin must park it, step out of the vehicle, and rest in his real home' (2003:80).

³¹ Comans 1993:37 n62

³² Believed to be from about the eleventh century.

³³ The *Aparokṣānubhūti* outlines a fifteen step yoga process, which includes all eight limbs of Patañjali's *aṣṭāṅga* path, and equates *samādhi* with both knowledge and bliss.

None of these three *darśanas* developed in isolation. Each was influenced by other schools of thought in a continuing process of development. Yoga in particular reflects an attempt to synthesise a range of influences, in a way which is not always intellectually consistent³⁴. Nevertheless, while their ultimate starting and ending points are the same - the suffering of worldly existence and the escape from the cycle of re-birth - there remain clear distinctions in their analysis of the nature and means of liberation. The most notable of these are between the dualist worldview of Sāṃkhya, with the real diverse and disjointed world of *prakṛti* evolving in *saṃyoga* with a multiplicity of passive *puruṣas*, and the non-dualist worldview of Advaita, where that diverse and disjointed reality is an illusory misperception and the ultimate reality is ‘one only, without a second’, and between the acquisition of liberating knowledge through conscious thought and reflection, in both Sāṃkhya and Advaita, and the transcendence of knowledge through the stilling of the mind’s turnings in Yoga’s ‘objectless concentration’ of *asamprajñata samādhi* (YS1.51). Perhaps fortunately for students of Indian philosophy, the question of whether Sāṃkhya knowledge, Yoga practice, or Advaita knowledge through practice successfully terminates the saṃsāric cycle is one to which, barring a leap in modern science, we will never know the answer.

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³⁴ See Rukmani 1997:623 (note 16 above).

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